

ALTERNATIVE NETWORK SELECTION FOR A COMMUNICATION DEVICE

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally relates to alternative network selections, and more specifically to a method and an apparatus for providing an access by a communication device to a communication network through an alternative network.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

When a cellular wireless mobile communication device is first switched on, its receiver scans an allocated radio frequency ("RF") spectrum for appropriate signals from base stations in a network that may provide service. Once the cellular wireless mobile communication device has identified and synchronized to a group of base stations, it ranks RF characteristics associated with each of the identified base stations in order of filtered signal strength. The cellular wireless mobile communication device then selects the base station having the strongest filtered signal strength on which to "camp." Camping on a base station refers to the reading of broadcast information for monitoring paging messages that alert the cellular wireless mobile communication device of an incoming call. Once the cellular wireless mobile communication device camps on a base station, a signaling sequence, referred to as a routing area ("RA") update, is exchanged between the network and cellular wireless mobile communication device. The RA update informs the network of a subgroup of base stations available in a RA which include the base station on which the cellular wireless mobile communication device is camping. The RA update assists the network in determining how to reach the cellular wireless mobile communication device. For example, when a subscriber number is called, the network must determine how a mobile switching centre ("MSC") routes a paging message to the cellular wireless mobile communication device.

In a typical cellular system, the cellular wireless mobile communication device does not provide the network with its location information, such as a cell identifier, every time it selects a new cell. Because the radio wave propagation is highly sensitive to changes in the physical environment even in an environment where the RF coverage is very good, cell reselection occurs frequently. Therefore, if the cellular wireless mobile communication device were to inform the network for every cell reselection, signaling between the cellular wireless mobile communication device and network would likely congest the control channels. Further, because signaling messages deliver no revenue to the operator of the network, signaling messages are maintained at a level that is as infrequent as practical. When the MSC receives a call from an outside party who desires to reach the cellular wireless mobile communication device, or its user, the MSC looks up the logical location of the cellular wireless mobile communication device indicated by the RA, and sends a paging message only to a base station controller ("BSC") in the RA. The BSC then sends paging messages on control channels only to the base station identified in the RA. The cellular wireless mobile communication device then receives the paging message and alerts the user of the incoming call.

Generally, the cellular wireless mobile communication device acts autonomously and simply listens to the broadcast control channels ("BCCH"), which include paging messages, of each cell. However, to provide the location information of the cellular wireless mobile communication device as it travels through the network, the cellular wireless mobile communication device sends an RA update message to the network whenever the cellular wireless mobile communication device crosses an RA boundary. This RA update procedure includes an authentication procedure to verify the cellular wireless mobile communication device as a valid subscriber. If the cellular wireless mobile communication device fails to send a RA update as it leaves one RA and enters into another, the network would send pages to the previous RA, and the cellular wireless mobile communication device would miss incoming calls. If the network fails to receive an RA update from the cellular wireless mobile communication device for some time, such as several hours to several days, the network will detach the cellular wireless mobile communication device from the network. The network may send to voice-mail any received calls for the cellular

wireless mobile communication device after detaching. Most cellular systems have a periodic timer that causes the cellular wireless mobile communication device to perform the RA update at a predetermined time interval such as every two hours. An RA update procedure is additionally used when a cellular wireless mobile

5 communication device changes its operating systems, or radio access technology, such as a change between a Global System for Mobile Telecommunication ("GSM") system and a Universal Mobile Telecommunication Service ("UMTS") system. The RA update is also performed when the cellular wireless mobile communication device returns to its idle mode from certain communication services such as Dual Transfer

10 Mode ("DTM").

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment of a communication system in accordance with the present invention;

5 FIG. 2 is an exemplary flowchart illustrating a method in a communication system for providing an access by a communication device to a first communication network through a second communication network in accordance with the present invention;

10 FIG. 3 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment having a plurality of communication networks and a plurality of alternative network controllers in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 4 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment having a plurality of communication networks connected to a single alternative network controller in accordance with the present invention;

15 FIG. 5 is an exemplary flowchart illustrating a method in a communication system for providing an access by a communication device to a preferred communication network of a plurality of communication networks in accordance with the present invention;

20 FIG. 6 is an exemplary flowchart further illustrating the process of directing the communication device to access a preferred alternative network controller based upon a predetermined condition; and

FIG. 7 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment in accordance with the present invention of a communication system configured to provide an alternate communication path.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present invention generally provides a method and apparatus for providing an access by a communication device to a first communication network through a second communication network. The first communication network may typically be a cellular communication network such as, but not limited to, Third Generation ("3G"), Global System for Mobile Communications ("GSM"), or Code Division Multiple Access ("CDMA"); the communication device may be a cellular mobile communication device compatible with the first communication system or a communication device supporting a cellular core network signaling protocol of the first communication network; and the second communication network may be an unlicensed communication network such as, but not limited to, a wireless local area network ("WLAN"), which is less expensive to operate than a licensed cellular band and is capable of supporting a wideband data transfer. The communication device, upon entering the second communication network, communicates with the first communication network through an alternative network controller utilizing the second communication network, and operates normally.

FIG. 1 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment of a communication system in accordance with the present invention. The communication system 100 comprises a first communication network 102, which is illustrated as a cellular network. The first communication network 102 is coupled to an alternative network controller 104, which is coupled to a second communication network 106. The second communication network 106 is illustrated as wirelessly communicating with a communication device 108. The second communication network 106 may be one of many types of networks such as, but not limited to, an unlicensed communication network, a local area network ("LAN"), a wireless local area network ("WLAN"), a wideband network, an infrared network, and a short-range network.

FIG. 2 is an exemplary flowchart 200 illustrating a method in the communication system 100 for providing an access by the communication device 108 to the first communication network 102 through the second communication network 106 in accordance with the present invention. The first communication network 102 operates using a cellular core network signaling protocol, and the communication

device 108 supports the cellular core network signaling protocol of the first communication network 102, and has a first identification such as an assigned telephone number, which is generally used to establish communication with the first communication network 102. The process begins in block 202, and the
5 communication device 108 is assigned a second identification in block 204. The second communication network 106 may assign the second identification to the communication device 108 in response to a request to access the second communication network 106 transmitted from the communication device 108, and may authorize the communication device 108 to access the second communication
10 network 106. The second identification assigned to the communication device 108 may be a temporary identification such as an IP address dynamically assigned by the second communication network 106.

Upon assigning the second identification, the second communication network 106 enables the communication device 108 to access the alternative network
15 controller 104 in block 206. The alternative network controller 104 then establishes communication between the communication device 108 and the first communication network 102 through the alternative network controller 104 in block 208. As shown in block 210 within block 208, the alternative network controller 104 may establish communication by converting a protocol of the second communication network 106
20 into the cellular core network signaling protocol of the first communication network 102, and converting the cellular core network signaling protocol of the first communication network 102 into the protocol of the second communication network 106. As also shown in block 212, the alternative network controller 104 may also establish communication by creating and controlling a tunnel, which is an extra
25 protocol addressing layer used to carry data, between the communication device 108 and the alternative network controller 104.

The alternative network controller 104 then associates the first identification of the communication device 108 with the second identification of the communication device 108 in block 214. This association of the first identification to the second
30 identification enables the communication system 100 to re-direct services, originally directed to the first identification, to the second identification of the communication device 108. For example, by associating the assigned subscriber identity of the

communication device 108 with the IP address assigned by the second communication network, the alternate network controller 104 can properly forward a call to the communication device 108 through the second communication network 106. Other services such as a short message service ("SMS") message and caller ID can also be properly forwarded, and the communication device 108 is also able to initiate and utilize any other function normally associated with services provided by the first communication network 102. In block 214, the alternative network controller 104 may further receive identification information of the second communication network 106 such as, but not limited to, a unique identifier, location information, a medium access control ("MAC") identification, a service set identifier ("SSID"), and an IP address, and may associate the identification information of the second communication network 106 with the first identification of the communication device 108. The process then terminates in block 216.

FIG. 3 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment of a communication system 300 in accordance with the present invention. Compared to the communication system 100 of FIG. 1, the communication system 300 comprises a plurality of alternative network controllers (only one additional alternative network controller 302 is shown), each of which is connected to a corresponding communication network (only one additional communication network 304 is shown) of a plurality of communication networks. All alternative network controllers are coupled to the second communication network 106. The second communication network 106 is again illustrated to be coupled wirelessly with a communication device 108. In the environment illustrated in FIG. 3, the communication device 108 may be connected to either the first communication network 102 or the third communication network 304. Alternatively, as illustrated in FIG. 4, a communication system 400 may comprise a plurality of communication networks (only three communication networks 102, 304, and 402 are shown) connected to a single alternative network controller 104.

FIG. 5 is an exemplary flowchart 500 illustrating a method in the communication system 300 for providing an access by the communication device 108 to a preferred communication network through the second communication network 106 in accordance with the present invention. As previously illustrated, the first

communication network 102 operates using the cellular core network signaling protocol, and the communication device 108 supports the cellular core network signaling protocol of the first communication network 102, and has the first identification such as an assigned subscriber identity, which is generally used to
5 establish communication with the first communication network 102. The process begins in block 502, and the communication device 108 is assigned a second identification such as an IP address in block 504. The second communication network 106 may assign the second identification to the communication device 108 in response to a request to access the second communication network 106 transmitted
10 from the communication device 108, may authorize the communication device 108 to access the second communication network 106.

Upon assigning the second identification, the second communication network 106 enables the communication device 108 to access the plurality of alternative network controllers 104 and 302 in block 506, and the communication system 300
15 directs the communication device 108 to access a preferred alternative network controller from the plurality of alternative network controllers 104 and 302 based upon a predetermined condition in block 508. For this example, it is assumed that the alternative network controller 302 meets the predetermined condition and is designated as the preferred alternative network controller. The preferred alternative
20 network controller 302 then establishes communication between the communication device 108 and the third communication network 304, which operates the preferred alternative network controller 302 through the preferred alternative network controller 302 block 510. As shown in block 512 within block 510, the preferred alternative network controller 302 may establish communication by converting a protocol of the
25 second communication network 106 into a cellular core network signaling protocol of the third communication network 304, which is coupled to the preferred alternative network controller 302, and by converting the cellular core network signaling protocol of the third communication network 304 into the protocol of the second communication network 106. As also shown in block 514, the preferred alternative
30 network controller 302 may also establish communication by creating and controlling a tunnel between the communication device 108 and the preferred alternative network controller 302.

The preferred alternative network controller 302 then associates the first identification of the communication device 108 with the second identification of the communication device 108 in block 516. As previously described, this association of the first identification to the second identification enables the communication system
5 300 to re-direct services originally directed to the first identification of to the second identification of the communication device 108. The preferred alternative network controller 302 may further receive identification information of the second communication network 106 as previously described, and may associate the identification information of the second communication network 106 with the first
10 identification of the communication device 108. The process then terminates in block 418.

FIG. 6 is an exemplary flowchart further illustrating block 508 of the process of the communication system 300 directing the communication device 108 to access a preferred alternative network controller based upon a predetermined condition. The
15 communication device 108 is initially connected to a default alternative network controller in block 602. Because the communication device 108 supports the cellular core network signaling protocol of the first communication network 102, the alternative network controller 104, which is connected to and operated by the first communication network 102, may be designated as the default alternative network
20 controller. The default alternative network controller 104 then determines which of the plurality of alternative network controllers satisfies the predetermined condition in block 604, and selects an alternative network controller meeting the predetermined condition as the preferred alternative network controller in block 606.

The predetermined condition used to select a preferred alternative network
25 controller may be one or more of variety of conditions. For example, if the communication device 108 is currently located outside of a coverage area of the first communication network 102 and accessing through the second network 106, but the user of the communication device 108, anticipating to move and to be outside of the second network coverage, desires a cellular coverage by another network, then a
30 preferred alternative network controller operated by a communication network having a cellular coverage of the current location of the communication device 108 may be selected. If the user of the communication device 108 desires a function that is not

supported or provided by the communication network operating the default alternative network controller, then an alternative network controller operated by a communication network, which does have the desired function, may be selected as the preferred alternative network controller. The selection of the preferred alternative
5 network controller may be based upon a pre-arranged relationship between the operating communication networks of the plurality of alternative network controllers. It may simply be that the default alternative network controller has reached its maximum traffic capacity, and has to select another alternative network controller.

FIG. 7 is an exemplary block diagram of an embodiment of a communication
10 system 700 configured to provide an alternate communication path in accordance with the present invention. The communication system 700 comprises a first communication network 702, which is configured to support a first cellular core network signaling protocol. An alternative network controller 704 is coupled to the first communication network 702, and is configured to communicate with the first
15 communication network 702 using the first cellular core network signaling protocol. A second communication network 706 is coupled to the alternative communication network 704, and is configured to support a second communication network protocol and to communicate with the alternative network controller 704 using the second communication network protocol. The second communication network 706 may be
20 one of many types of networks such as, but not limited to, an unlicensed communication network, a local area network ("LAN"), a wireless local area network ("WLAN"), a wideband network, an infrared network, and a short-range network. A communication device 708 has a first identification and is coupled to the second communication network 706. The communication device 708 is configured to
25 support the first cellular core network signaling protocol and the second communication network protocol, and to receive a second identification from the second communication network 706. The second communication network 706 may be further configured to assign the second identification to the communication device 708 in response to a request from the communication device 708 to access the second
30 communication network 706.

The alternative network controller 704 is further configured to associate the first identification of the communication device 708 with the second identification of

the communication device 708, and to establish communication between the communication device 708 and the first communication network 702 through the alternative network controller 704. This association of the first identification to the second identification enables the communication system 700 to re-direct services, originally directed to the first identification, to the second identification of the communication device 708. Such services may include a telephone call, a short message service ("SMS") message, and caller ID. The alternative network controller 704 may further receive identification information of the second communication network 706 such as, but not limited to, a unique identifier, location information, a medium access control ("MAC") identification, a service set identifier ("SSID"), and an IP address, and may associate the identification information of the second communication network 706 with the first identification of the communication device 708. The alternative network controller 704 further comprises a protocol converter 710, which is configured to convert the first cellular communication core network signaling protocol into the second communication network protocol, and to convert the second communication network protocol into the first cellular core network signaling protocols. The alternative network controller 704 may further comprise a tunnel controller 712 configured to set up, maintain, and control a tunnel between the communication device 708 and the alternative network controller 704 to establish communication between the communication device 708 and the first communication network 702.

While the preferred embodiments of the invention have been illustrated and described, it is to be understood that the invention is not so limited. Numerous modifications, changes, variations, substitutions and equivalents will occur to those skilled in the art without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention as defined by the appended claims.